DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 052 655 FL 002 398

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TITLE Writing English Lessons for the Non-Academic Adult.
PUB DATE 6 Mar 71
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Fifth Annual TESOL Convention, New Orleans, La., March 6, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Academic Ability, Academic Achievement, *Academically Handicapped, *Adult Education, *English (Second Language), Learning Motivation, Lesson Plans, Motivation, Non English Speaking, Resentment, School Attitudes, Student Attitudes, *Student Motivation, Student Needs, Teacher Attitudes, *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The non-academic adult comes to his English class with deeply fixed convictions about teaching methods, proper classroom procedures, and what constitutes learning. Often, the less educated the student, the more firm and precise his ideas about education. To fly in the face of these convictions by presenting English using a methodology developed primarily with children and academic adults is to lose the students' attention in the classroom, if not their attendance. If the adult feels that he cannot learn in this way, he will not, in fact, learn. Instead throughout the lessons the means must be found to satisfy the students' pre-conceptions while at the same time satisfying the educational and linguistic requirements of learning a language. However, this means need not be a diluted compromise in either direction. The search for methods to satisfy every requirement equally can lead to better lessons and provide insights useful in other learning situations. (Author)

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WRITING ENGLISH LESSONS FOR THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT

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at

TESOL Convention
New Orleans, La.
March 6, 1971

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Writing English Lessons for the Non-Academic Adult

I want to preface this discussion by pointing out that my experience in the past four years has been with Chinese adults, primarily Cantonese speakers. Therefore specific instances, requests and examples cited will refer to these students. From previous experience with Spanish-speaking adults and under-educated English-speaking adults, I believe their overall needs are similar and in many instances the specific opinions coincide as well, but it should be remembered that because of the much greater differences between a language such as Cantonese and English, the Chinese adults' difficulties and anxieties will be intensified.

The non-academic adult comes to his English class with deeply fixed convictions about the educational process. These include opinions about acceptable teaching methods, and classroom procedures, and about what constitutes learning. The adult with minimal schooling has not ceased to think about school from the time he left it. Rather, it has probably occupied his thoughts often, through the years, in his hopes for himself and in his aspirations for his children. In the course of time he has built up his own image of what a school is, based on his recollections and on the reports of his associates. Like anyone with only a few years of school experience (Why aren't you doing well in arithmetic? Mrs. Smith don't learn me as good as Mrs. Masters), he has not yet found out that learning is the job of the student, not the teacher. If the adult teaching situation fails to live up to his image of school, he will mistrust its ability to, as he thinks of it, instill the English language in him. The well-educated adult student has at least had the advantage of going

through years of school during which he saw methods and expectations varied according to subject matter and the age of the student. However, because of this, he will expect teaching methods and classroom procedures geared to his maturity.

What is the result when adults with definite expectations of what they will find in an English class are faced with a TESOL methodology which does not fulfill these expectations. Quite simply, they are convinced that they cannot learn English in such classes, and with this conviction, of course, they cannot learn. The difficulties of this terrible language for the Chinese only serve to deepen this conviction. Further, there is unconscious resentment against this language which is a barrier to earning a livelihood for the student and, for his children, to taking advantage of educational opportunities. Because this resentment is primarily unconscious, it tends to be displaced, and it becomes in part directed toward an educational situation which does not meet the students' standards. As they stumble over the unfamiliar sounds and structures, the resentment builds.

Since I am speaking from experience with Chinese adults, one question will, of course, be asked. Given the traditional respect of the Chinese for education and for teachers, cannot the teacher, with a bilingual aide if necessary, explain that his method has been proved the most successful means for teaching a language? Won't the students be convinced by this explanation, coming as it does from a professional? There are several answers to this question. First, it is always dangerous to rely up a stereotype and never more dangerous than to rely upon one in relationships with one's students. Secondly, such respect as may exist relates to the successful teacher, the one who gets his students past such hurdles as exams, and with the students failing, in their eyes, the hurdle of the English language, their English teacher hardly qualifies here. Finally,

such respect as there may be for an individual English teacher is not sufficient to overcome their long term respect for and belief in the educational system in which they grew up and in its methods.

This tradition does have one basis in fact. The Chinese student is not accustomed to complaining or objecting directly to his teacher. Fortunately, there are ever-increasing exceptions even to this general rule, for it tends to result in the teacher's conviction that he has succeeded in persuading his students of the value of his methods and in the student's taking his objections elsewhere. If the school he attends is well provided with bilingual counsellors and other staff who maintain close non-teaching relationships with the students it may have the good luck to have most of the students' objections voiced within the school. Otherwise, and even in this case if immediate classroom response is not made to objections raised, the students take their objections and, even more important, their resentment to their community. In San Francisco, we have seen this result in newspaper articles, and community meetings specifically directed against various schools where English is taught, as well as objections raised wherever two or three, or more, are gathered together for whatever purpose. Failure to respond directly and immediately to the feelings of the students has had one result: they accuse us of taking monies provided specifically for teaching them English and misusing it because we insist upon methods which can not teach them English. In other words, we are not only bad educators; we are vultures preying upon the community.

In San Francisco, most adult English classes depend for their existence on the maintenance of an attendance of 15. Since one result of the students' disappointment in the teaching methods is obviously dropping out of class, some individual teachers turn instead to 'giving

the student what he wants.' This has many disadvantages, however, in return for its one advantage of maintaining attendance. It tends to serve the interests of one student or of a small group of students at a time. It tends to lose sight of linguistic goals, particularly that of fluency in speaking. Finally, it makes movement between classes extremely difficult, an advantage perhaps to that teacher, but a real disadvantage to students whose working hours may change or who may really be ready to progress beyond that level.

Let me repeat that an adult student who is convinced he cannot learn in a given classroom situation will not, in fact, learn. As the difficulty of the language makes it seem impossible of attainment, his conviction that he cannot learn and his resentment against the classroom situation build, hindering his ability to learn even more. To convince him of the effectiveness of our method, we would have to teach him to speak a goodly amount of the language almost immediately, and, given the problems of a Chinese in learning English, this is impossible. The immediate classroom response of the individual teacher has, as we have seen, its pitfalls and, in any event, satisfies only a small number of all those needing to learn English. The only solution then is to write English lessons which are geared to the students' expectations, that is, which teach what the students expect to be taught using methods acceptable to them. However, the writer of lessons must not seek the solution of immediate and piecemeal satisfaction of the most volubly expressed student demands as does the individual teacher. Instead he must seek means to write lessons that will satisfy the students' expectations while at the same time satisfying the linguistic requirements of learning a language. In carefully working out this solution, I believe, he will not only

discover teaching methods that may be more effective in other situations as well, but also discover some solutions to problems that have plagued him within the audio-lingual methodology.

In this connection, I must point out, that it is no easy matter to discover from the students' individual expressions of dissatisfaction just what specifically they object to and what specifically they want in its place. Here the cooperation of the community is essential in gaining feedback, making suggestions for student comment and even gaining cooperation with and feedback from trial balloons. Cooperation should be sought from a variety of community sources since any one report is inevitably colored by the opinions of the reporter. Thus, even a writer who is a member of the community himself should be careful to check out his "reading" of student demands in a variety of ways, so that his own feelings will not interfere.

The major complaint of the students against present TESOL classroom methods is that they are not lessons for adults. You can hear for yourself the strength of this feeling in a former student's remarks in a recent community meeting. (Tape) Their description of the lessons as being designed for children is based primarily on two elements of the method. The first is the use of pictures, on flashcards, and charts, and even in texts. Pictures such as these, unfortunately often the very same pictures, are used in their children's classes, and their own beginning texts in learning to read and write Chinese made ample use of pictures. Second is the teaching of oral English only, without teaching how to read the language. Our Chinese students expect to be taught to read, and they tend to measure their own progress in terms of how much English they can read.

But the writer in designing drills also finds the use of flashcard or chart cues very difficult. Drilling a simple structure with the substitution of one item is about all they can do. You can combine a single oral cue and one flashcard to extend drills a little further. One oral cue at a time is also as much as basic level students can handle. But they must learn to handle the complexities of the language and also to handle longer and longer utterances. How are these then to be drilled with only flashcards and oral cues? Occasionally, when I think I've worked out a satisfactory drill, the teachers ask "Do you think I'm an octopus?"

Let me mention a specific example in lessons for the Chinese. In Chinese transitive verbs are never used without an object - as we use 'studying'. Each verb has a formal object word associated with it for use in such a situation. Thus they never say just 'duhk' - 'study', but always 'duhk syù' literally 'study a book' when there is not a specific object. If a verb is constantly drilled for tense, question formation, etc, with the chart or flashcard object, the Chinese student will assume that this object has the same function that it does in Chinese. For this reason, when a number of verbs are used in a drill, such as a drill on past tense formation, the object ought to be changed each time the verb occurs. Two flashcards? Chart and a flashcard? Believe me the teacher will object and, having tried to do it in the classroom myself, I think the teacher is right.

However, if from the first day the student is taught to read in English the words he is learning to say, his desire to learn to read the language will be satisfied, and drills can be designed using written cues almost from the beginning, allowing much greater flexibility in what is drilled. If these drills are provided in the student's text, he can also

practice them outside of class. This is a great benefit to the beginning student who must otherwise rely on his memory for outside oral practice and, therefore, does not practice.

There are two things to be pointed out in connection with teaching reading from the very beginning. The first is that for a good long time it should be sight reading only, forgetting the intricacies of phonics and rules for sounding out words. This poses no problem with Chinese students because their own language must be mostly sight read anyway. Secondly, this by no means involves giving up oral drill with oral or picture cues completely. Text book drills can be extended with these, and additionally, the students whose demands are satisfied are willing to accept some drills with pictures and even to appreciate the way in which they speed up the drill. The one caution here is to make sure they are not the same pictures used in their children's classrooms.

The teaching of reading need not take away a great deal of time from the oral practice of English. If only the new words of each lesson are taught, plus a few necessary instructional terms, then the oral drill, cued as it is by using the new words and the words previously taught, serves to reinforce the learning of them.

Teaching writing as well would depend upon class time available. We provide writing practice sheets upon which the new words and any conversation in the lesson are handwritten with lines below for the student to copy the writing. Except in our two three-hour classes, we must leave the writing to be self-taught. But perhaps I rely on this too heavily because I learned to write this way myself.

The students also ask for translation of the material in the lessons, both vocabulary and instructional language. In part, their demand for Chinese teachers also reflects the desire to have immediate translation,

but even with a bilingual teacher they do not have a record of the Chinese meaning unless class time is taken to write it down. In reality, in oral lessons cued with pictures students who are supposed to be participating in a drill are all too often preoccupied with making notes of the English word - in characters representing somewhat the individual sounds - and the Chinese meaning as they gather it from the picture. The pictures on flashcards and charts are intended as cues - formalized symbols of the meaning - not as literal representation of the meaning. However, without translation, these pictures are the only clues to meaning except for the teacher's dramatics. Students also go to English-Chinese dictionaries if they have the written word, but several Chinese translations may be given and beginning students certainly have no means of ascertaining the correct one. The teacher is equally at a loss without translation for he has no way of knowing whether in fact the student has understood the correct meaning. Written translation obviates all of these difficulties, and additionally allows the writer to be sure that only the meaning intended in this particular instance will be translated, and allows the student to work to build his vocabulary outside of class.

Another reason that the student feels the lessons are for children is that the vocabulary and, in particular, structures of beginning English are not spoken every day on the street where he hears a good deal of English even in Chinatown. Instead, they are similar to his children's lessons and to the vocabulary and structures of his first Chinese readers. We cannot change the English language to satisfy his needs here, but we can provide him with sample conversations with the caution to the teacher that these are not to be 'taught', but are only for memorization. With translation they need not even be explained. The Chinese student is

accustomed to memorization and rote recitation, and another role of providing such conversations for memorization is to reassure him that we respect this traditional method. As an example of such conversations, we have recently provided a series of sample emergency phone calls. The student was worried that an emergency might arise when no bilingual person was available to help him. Of course, the particular situation covered in the conversations may never arise. However procedures were worked out carefully with the City Departments involved and the phone operators so that these conversations, as well as allaying the students' fears, do serve to drill them in the minimum required vocabulary for summoning emergency aid.

As adults, the students call for study outside the classroom. In Chinese schools this was required even of the youngest students, though this is changing now. If reading is taught and translation provided, then it is possible to assign homework. However, most adult students do work very long hours, or are engaged in looking for work, and certainly have little time for study. Therefore, it is important that the progress of the classroom lessons not be geared to completion of outside assignments. These can consist of writing practice, of narratives to read, perhaps with new words as long as they are translated, and comprehension questions on the narratives, and of review drills. When the students are more advanced, this affords an excellent opportunity to give them information about their new community and American customs without taking time from oral practice in the classroom.

It should be repeated that if the students' demands are satisfied so that he feels he is in a classroom where his maturity and his traditions are respected, he is then quite ready to accept the need for constant oral practice and the usefulness of picture cues in certain drills.

Measuring his progress in reading, according to his custom, he comes also to hear his progress in speaking the language and learns to take equal pride in this. Most important, because he has been consulted and his feelings have been taken into consideration, he feels proud of his class and his part in it and gains motivation to learn this complex language.

I would add a final word to writers of lessons for children. The adult students have taken their case to the community and they have been heard. You are next, for these adult students are the parents of children in our schools, many of whom are failing to gain an education because of their lack of English. In San Francisco, they are taking their case to the Board of Education already and soon their demands for their children will have to be heard too. I hope that some of the solutions found by writers for adults can be useful in writing for children.